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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a three-stage model for helping teachers to prepare themselves for conferencing with inner city parents. All of the concepts, procedures, and processes involved in the model are applicable to routine conferencing as well as the problem-oriented variety of conferencing toward which the model is focused. The first stage of the model, planning and organization, involves five steps which are concerned with delineating the student's school problems, selecting information which should be presented to parents, and deciding how to go about presenting this information to parents. During the second stage of the model, implementation, the teacher tries to structure the conference to accept the parent's feelings and remain open to any alternatives which they may suggest. The third stage of the model consists of self evaluation. A set of self-evaluation procedures was developed and elaborated in the course of conducting workshops for different groups of teachers. A list of questions has been developed to provide teachers with a frame of reference with which to evaluate both the process and product aspects of their parent conferences. A summary of both the model and the different questions used to help teachers plan, organize, implement, and evaluate their conferencing with inner-city parents is included in the appendix. (Author/AM)

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CONFERENCING WITH INNER-CITY PARENTS[1]

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Writers concerned with home-school communication sometimes acknowledge the importance of the affective aspect of parent conferencing; but in actual practice, most authorities have chosen to deal with conferencing as an exchange of information between the child's teacher and his/her parents. The informational aspect of conferencing should not be minimized, but teachers should also be encouraged to acquire techniques which help them accept and acknowledge the emotional aspects of their interaction with parents. Feelings are an important element in most conferences but they are especially important in conferencing with inner-city parents who are often faced with economic hardships as well as greater stress from community disorganization. Briefly, the teacher must attend to the feeling aspects of the parents' reaction during the conference if he/she expects to develop effective communication with them.

A three-stage model has proven useful in helping teachers prepare themselves for conferencing with inner-city parents. The focus of the model is on problem-oriented conferencing with inner-city parents since these are the kind of conferences which teachers find most difficult to conduct and most frequently request assistance with. However, all of the concepts, procedures, and processes involved in the model are also applicable to routine conferencing as well as the problem-oriented

variety of conferencing toward which the model is focused.

The first stage of the model, Planning and Organization, involves five steps which are concerned with delineating the student's school problems, selecting information which should be presented to the parents, and deciding how to go about presenting this information to the parents. The first step, specifying the problem, is concerned with helping the teacher avoid global statements and identify specific behaviors which inner-city parents can understand. At this point, the focus of the teacher's efforts should be on determining the student's achievement in basic skill areas and/or on specifying behaviors which interfere with learning. Here teachers are encouraged to concentrate on the following question: What behaviors need to be brought to the attention of the parents? This question is phrased in behavioral terms since experiences in conducting workshops with teachers indicate that they tend to describe a child's behavior in global terms when conferencint with parents. Analysis of tape recordings of parent conferences indicate that statements such as the following are commonplace: "Johnny disrupts the class," "Richard starts fights with other boys," "Mary just won't do her work," "Theodore just will not do his homework," "Delmar will not take turns."

Two alternative approaches can be used to help teachers develop more specific descriptions of a child's classroom behavior. The first approach is described by Froehlich and

Hoyt (1959, pp. 235-259) who concentrates on helping teachers write anecdotal records and prepare behavior rating scales. The second approach is evident in the work of Stephens (1976, pp. 77-158) and Cooper (1974, pp. 1-58) who prefer to use direct behavioral observation and criterion-referenced achievement tests. Experiences with inner-city parents suggest that the behavioral approach is the one which they prefer to have teachers use in conferencing with them. The author has developed a set of training exercises for teachers which are based on the work of both Stephens (1976) and Cooper (1974). A detailed description of these procedures is beyond the scope of the present paper; however, a brief description of these procedures along with a few examples should indicate how the training procedures are implemented.

Two additional questions are used to help teachers refine their descriptions of the behaviors which interfere with classroom learning. The starting point for the development of these questions was Stephen's (1976, pp. 13-23) description of the two types of behaviors which interfere with the acquisition of academic and social skills. According to Stephens, handicapping behaviors can be conceptualized as deficits in rate of behavior (both over-emission and under-emission) and weak control of behavior. Several attempts were made to show teachers how to use these concepts, but it proved necessary to transpose them into a somewhat different form. The following two questions

have proven most useful in helping teachers delineate and describe the classroom behaviors which interfere with learning: What behaviors do you feel the student should develop? and What behaviors do you feel should be eliminated? Notice that both of these questions are phrased so that it is clear that an element of teacher judgement is involved. When questions are stated in this fashion ("you feel") there is an acknowledgement that the teacher's professional judgement is involved and that he/she has an obligation to explain the reasons why any behavior needs to be developed or eliminated.

In response to the first question, the teacher might decide that he/she feels that Theodore should develop the following behaviors: remain in his seat unless excused by the teacher, master the Dalch sight vocabulary words, and learn the short vowel sounds. For the second question, Theodore's teacher might feel that the following behaviors should be eliminated: tripping other children who pass his desk, throwing objects at other children, talking without permission, hitting other children, scribbling on his math papers, and making animal noises during class. When behaviors such as those listed above for the second question are delineated and measured, the teacher is then in a good position to show the parent how Theodore disrupts the class. The situation seems to hold true for the behaviors specified for the first question, i.e., those to be developed. Experience with inner-city parents indicates that they can relate better to teachers when concrete behaviors which can be described and counted are discussed with them.

The second step, organizing information, is concerned with collecting and selecting information which can be used to show the parents that their child actually has a certain kind of difficulty in school. Here the teacher is encouraged to evaluate his/her evidence so that statements to the parents can be presented with an appropriate degree of certainty. The following question is used to help teachers collect and organize the information they plan to present to parents during the conference: What evidence do you have to show the parents that this is a problem area? This question follows naturally from the two questions described earlier for step one. That is, teachers are encouraged to collect evidence so they can show parents why they feel it is necessary to develop and/or eliminate the behaviors that they are going to call to the parents' attention. For purposes of effective communication, it is most important that the teachers are able to examine their evidence and determine just how certain they are that a problem exists in some given area.

In Theodore's case, for example, what evidence does the teacher have to indicate that hitting other children is a problem area which needs to be corrected. If the teacher makes a vague, global statement such as "Theodore is always hitting other children," one of the parents is likely to say something like, "How do you know, did you see him?" When this happens, teachers often become upset and angry because they feel their professional

competence is being questioned. The question stated above encourages teachers to evaluate their evidence before going into a conference and to exercise care in how they phrase their statements to parents. If the teacher indicates his/her concern about Theodore's hitting other children and presents a concrete description of the frequency of this behavior, then the parents are much more likely to acknowledge the existence of a problem and puruse relevant details in a more objective fashion. For example, Theodore's teacher might present the following pattern of evidence to the parent: the teacher has observed Theodore strike other students on seven different occasions during the last two weeks, four times in the classroom, two times on the playground, and once in the restroom; seven different students (four girls and three boys) have also reported being hit by Theodore during the past two weeks; and three teachers have reported seeing Theodore hit other children on the playground. The parents may well have questions about the circumstances of Theodore's hitting other children, but they are much less likely to question the existence of a problem when information is presented in this fashion.

Teachers are also encouraged to think about the question, What have you done to help solve the problem? when they are collecting information to share with the parents. In one form or another, inner-city parents often get around to asking the teacher this question. Consideration of this question not only

helps teachers improve their conferencing, but also encourages them to identify intervention strategies and try them with students before contacting the parents for a conference. Experience with teachers suggests that this question encourages teachers to assume some responsibility for changes in the child's behavior rather than leaving all of the responsibility with the parents. When both the parents and teacher can acknowledge that their efforts have not been entirely successful, then they can concentrate on pooling their resources to find strategies for solving the problem which interferes with learning.

The third step, specifying the objectives, involves describing specific changes which the teacher feels should occur in the student's behavior. To a substantial degree, the conference objectives formulated at this step are closely related to the behaviors specified at the first step of the model. However, they are not usually the same because the teacher will be soliciting the cooperation of the parents and discussing intervention strategies which he/she plans to implement. Here the general question, What are your objectives for the conference? serves as the focal point for the teacher's planning activities but three more specific questions are also necessary. The first question, What changes in the student's behavior should you concentrate on producing? does not always get the same response as the two questions formulated to help the teacher identify the behaviors to be developed and/or eliminated.

For example, the teacher may decide that it is not wise to concentrate on all of the problem areas at one time and select some of the more critical areas to concentrate on. Also, the teacher might decide that some of the problem areas can best be handled at school without involving the parents directly. Thus, it can be seen that the teacher must use professional judgement in deciding which behaviors should be called to the attention of the parents, which should be handled at school, and which should be postponed for remediation at a later time.

The second question, What would you like the parents to do to help bring about the desired behaviors? has proven useful in helping teachers clarify what they want from parents. In workshops for teachers, this question serves as a focal point in encouraging teachers to decide on what kind of help they want from the parents. If teachers take this kind of approach to inner-city parents, then the conference is much more likely to evolve along the lines of constructive planning for the child than if the parents are simply presented with problems. Discussions with inner-city parents indicates that they often feel upset, helpless, and angry with teachers when they are given a description of their child's learning and/or behavior problems without concrete suggestions as to how they can help. Here again, parents are more likely to react positively and become actively involved in working constructively with the teacher when they sense that the teacher is soliciting their

help because he/she is deeply concerned about their child's education. This feeling stands in sharp contrast to negative feelings which are engendered when inner-city parents sense that the teacher is giving them a message which says in essence, "Your child has a problem, now what are you going to do about it?"

The final question, What are you, the teacher, willing to do to bring about the desired behavioral changes? serves to focus attention on the teacher's responsibility to remain actively involved in attempting to achieve the desired behavioral changes. Inner-city teachers who have participated in the parent conferencing workshops find that most parents are appreciative of the fact that the teacher has taken the trouble to formulate a tentative plan for remedying their child's difficulties and are willing to take the time to share the plan with them. When parents feel at ease, they usually wish to discuss the teacher's plans and can frequently provide constructive information about their child which the teacher can use to improve his/her instructional strategies.

In summary, the first three steps of the Planning and Organization stage (specifying the problem, organizing information, and specifying objectives) are all cognitive in the sense that they all require the teacher to collect and organize information which is to be shared with the parents. In contrast, the third and fourth steps require that the teacher become familiar with certain counseling skills which enable

him/her to attend to the parents' feelings and minimize their defensiveness. Several types of counseling techniques have been presented to teachers during training sessions, but those from Carkhuff's (1973) "tell-show-do" model have proven to be the ones which teachers master most quickly and find most useful in their conferencing with parents. A detailed description of the Carkhuff model is beyond the scope of the present paper. However, it is worthwhile to note that Carkhuff (1973) describes four sequential counseling skills, attending, responding, initiating, and communicating, in the second edition of his text, The art of helping. Experience in conducting workshops for teachers indicates that they can achieve a reasonable degree of fluency with these four counseling skills during an intensive one-day workshop if the "tell-show-do" approach is followed carefully. Persons interested in implementing a workshop to familiarize teachers with the counseling skills described by Carkhuff can obtain a copy of the Trainer's guide for the art of helping (Carkhuff & Pierce, 1975). This training guide was designed for use with the second edition of The art of helping (Carkhuff, 1973) which describes the four counseling skills mentioned above. The counseling skills are somewhat different in The art of helping III (Carkhuff, Pierce, & Cannon, 1977) which represents the most current version of Carkhuff's work.

Thus, the fourth step, selecting counseling techniques,

presupposes familiarity with a set of counseling skills which are suitable for use in parent conferencing. Two questions are used to help teachers plan how they will use their counseling techniques to minimize defensiveness and help the parents clarify their feelings about the child's school problems. These questions can be used with the counseling skills provided by Carkhuff or any similar group of counseling techniques with which the teacher might be familiar. These questions are: How much information do the parents already have about the problem? and How do you think the parents will feel about the conference? Both questions serve the purpose of helping teachers prepare themselves for the kind of emotional reaction they are likely to encounter when they bring the child's school problems to the attention of the parents. Several different sources of information are available for teachers who make a sincere effort to anticipate how the parents are likely to react during the conference. For example, the teacher may draw an impression formed during prior contacts with the parents, obtain information from other teachers who are familiar with the family, and/or check with the principal or counselor to see what kinds of contact they have had with the family.

If, for example, the teacher suspects that the parents are likely to become angry and attack the teacher when he/she indicates that their child has school problems, then the most likely approach would be for the teacher to be relatively quiet and

attend carefully to the parents while they explode and express their hostility and anger. In this regard, the natural reaction seems to be for teachers to become angry themselves and argue with the parents. Yet, this approach almost never results in constructive action which benefits the child. The best approach is usually for the teacher to attend to what the parents are saying and allow them to "talk out" their intense anger without becoming involved in an argument. As the anger and hostility are worked through, the parents gradually settle down emotionally and become more capable of meaningful interaction. This is especially true if the teacher's behavior indicates that he/she can accept the parents' angry feelings and still regard them as worthwhile persons. Many times such a catharsis ("talking out") requires the entire time allocated for the parent conference so it is necessary for the teacher to take the initiative and offer the parents the opportunity to meet again and continue with their discussion.

The fifth step, behavioral rehearsal, involves helping the teacher decide how he/she will go about explaining the child's difficulties to the parents. Experiences in working with inner-city teachers suggest that their conferencing is most effective when they try to anticipate how the parents will react and then guage their explanations accordingly. Two types of questions have proven useful in helping teachers plan how they will behave during the conference. The first question is,

How will I explain the child's problems to the parents? To answer this question, it has proven most useful to have teachers sequence and write out in detail the main points which they hope to get across to the parents. This procedure is especially important for teachers to follow during the first conferences that they plan using this model. Such a procedure is desirable since most teachers are under considerable anxiety when they are conducting problem-oriented conferences with inner-city parents. Under such circumstances, teachers are more likely to use emotionally charged words which unnecessarily offend parents or forget some of their information unless they have thoroughly rehearsed what they plan to say.

The second question takes the form of What would I say if . . .? and involves having the teacher think of some of the most threatening statements that a parent could make and then decide what their own response would be. Inner-city teachers participating in the training sessions have found behavioral rehearsal to be extremely helpful to them. One of the activities built into parent conferencing workshops is to have teachers divide into groups of three and have each of them list the five most threatening comments ever made to them by parents. After the list is compiled, the group members work together to formulate appropriate responses to the parents' statements. Sometimes all of the group members will agree on one teacher's response as being the most appropriate, but many times each

member of the group will formulate his/her own favorite response. The parent comments along with suggested teacher responses are then collected and typed for all of the groups. Workshop participants are then provided with a typed list which includes all of the parent comments from teachers in the different groups and the responses which the teachers have pooled their resources to provide.

During the second stage, Implementation, the teacher tries to structure the conference so he/she accepts the parents' feelings and remains open to any alternatives which they may suggest. Experience suggests that conscientious use of the conference model results in a significant improvement in quality of conferencing with inner-city parents. However, the model can be implemented most successfully when the workshops involve extended work with teachers. When the six-hour workshop is used, the final hour is devoted to having teachers plan a problem-oriented conference for one of their students. During the first thirty minutes each teacher develops his/her own conference plan. The teachers then reassemble into their respective triads and share their plan with the other members of their group. The workshop leaders circulate freely from group to group during this time and remain available for consultation.

After completing their conference plan, most of the participating teachers feel confident and are enthusiastic about

conducting their first conference using the model. Follow-up work within a two or three week period after the teachers have conducted their first conference is very important. The follow-up activities usually consist of a session lasting from one to two hours. At this time, teachers share the results of their endeavors with other workshop participants. The usual procedure is to have the teachers meet in small groups of six and share the results of their conference. Each of the small groups makes a tally of what their members have learned through conducting their first conference. The emphasis here is on identifying "what worked for me" so it can be shared with other participants as well as identifying problem areas and the strategies necessary to overcome them. In the case of problem areas, the teacher who encountered the problem is encouraged to play the role of the parent with another teacher who volunteers to play the teacher role and show how he/she would have handled the conference. Usually three or four follow-up meetings are necessary to provide support for the teachers and help them get into the habit of applying the skills which they have learned. When follow-up sessions are provided along with the basic, six-hour workshop, approximately 88 percent of the participants report a substantial improvement in their conferencing skills and an additional six percent of the participants report some improvement in their conferencing skills.

Finally, the third stage consists of Self-Evaluation

where the teacher is encouraged to examine both the process and product aspects of the conference. Here it was necessary to emphasize self-evaluation since most of the participating teachers reported that it is difficult for them to arrange for their immediate supervisors to sit in on parent conferences and help them evaluate their skills. Even in those cases where building administrators or supervisors were available to help teachers evaluate their skills, the teacher still chose to complete his/her own self-evaulations and then share their perceptions of the conference with those of the observer.

A set of self-evaluation procedures was gradually developed and elaborated in the course of conducting workshops for different groups of teachers. Teachers were interested in both process and product evaluation, but a considerable amount of time was required for the workshop leaders to identify an evaluation procedure which they found satisfactory. The process aspect of the self-evaluation necessarily centers around helping teachers determine the extent to which they adhered to the conference objectives while interacting with the parents. In this regard, of course, the teachers were not encouraged to stick to the original conference objectives if new information relevant to the child's school difficulties became evident during the conference. When this occurred, teachers were encouraged to evaluate any changes in objectives on the basis of whether or not they could be justified on the basis of new information obtained from the parent. The product aspect of the

self-evaluation was concerned with helping teachers determine how successful they had been in attaining their conference objectives. The following list of questions was developed to provide teachers with a frame of reference with which to evaluate both the process and product aspects of their parent conferences:

PROCESS EVALUATION

1. How well did you follow the conference plan as outlined at stage 1?
2. To what extent were you able to anticipate the feelings and behaviors of the parents?
3. How effectively did you use the counseling techniques included in the conference plan?

PRODUCT EVALUATION

1. To what extent were you able to communicate your concerns (in each problem area) to the parents?
2. How successful were you in formulating a mutually satisfactory plan of action?
3. What did you learn about yourself as a person from analyzing your own feelings and behavior during the conference?
4. How can you improve your conferencing from what you learned about yourself during the conference?

The different questions used to help teachers plan, organize, implement, and evaluate their conferencing with inner-city parents are summarized in Appendix A at the end of this paper. That is, the questions are listed under the different steps for each of the three stages of the model so that they can be retyped with appropriate spacing and used as a framework for guiding teachers in conference planning.

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Appendix A

A THREE-STAGE MODEL FOR CONFERENCING WITH INNER-CITY PARENTS

OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL:

Stage I: Organization and Planning

1. Specify the problem area(s).
2. Organize your information.
3. Specify your conference objectives.
4. Select your counseling techniques.
5. Rehearse your counseling techniques.

Stage II: Conferencing

Stage III: Self-Evaluation

1. Process evaluation
2. Product evaluation

QUESTIONS WHICH FACILITATE ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING

STAGE I: ORGANIZATION AND PLANNING

I. Specify the Problem Area(s)

A. What behaviors need to be brought to the attention of the parents?

1. What behaviors do you feel the student should develop?
2. What behaviors do you feel should be eliminated?

II. Organize Your Information

A. What evidence do you have to show the parents that this is a problem area?

B. What have you done to help solve the problem?

III. Specify Your Objectives

A. What are your objectives for the conference?

1. What changes in the student's behavior should you concentrate on producing?
2. What would you like the parents to do to help bring about the desired behaviors?
3. What are you, the teacher, willing to do to bring about the desired behavioral changes?

IV. Select Your Counseling Techniques

A. How much information do the parents already have about the problem?

B. How do you think the parents will feel about the conference?

V. Behavioral Rehearsal

A. How will I explain the child's problems to the parents?

B. What would I say if . . .?

STAGE II: IMPLEMENTATION

STAGE III: QUESTIONS WHICH FACILITATE SELF-EVALUATION

I. Process Evaluation

A. How well did you follow the conference plan as outlined at Stage I?

B. To what extent were you able to anticipate the feelings and behaviors of the parents?

C. How effectively did you use the counseling techniques included in the conference plan?

II. Product Evaluation

A. To what extent were you able to communicate your concerns (in each problem area) to the parents?

B. How successful were you in formulating a mutually satisfactory plan of action?

C. What did you learn about yourself as a person from analyzing your own feelings and behavior during the conference?

D. How can you improve your conferencing from what you learned about yourself during the conference?

Footnote

[1]This document represents a revised version of a paper entitled Special considerations in conferencing with parents of inner-city children which was presented by the author at the Third Annual Conference on Urban Education, Norfolk, VA, November, 1977.